

CHEMICAL COWBOYS

THE DEA'S SECRET MISSION TO HUNT DOWN
A NOTORIOUS ECSTASY KINGPIN

LISA SWEETINGHAM



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“BOBBY, LISTEN. Ray’s a little nervous,” the informant whispered over the phone. “He just has to make sure that, you know—that you’re all right.”

“Okay,” Gagne said. “Tomorrow morning.”

Gagne heard the urgency in “Tommy’s” voice. A few months earlier, the informant had introduced Gagne to Ray Solomon, a lanky ninety-pound Dominican dealer with a disarming three-toothed smile. Since then, Solomon had sold Gagne crack, heroin, cocaine, and two automatic Uzis with silencers. Solomon didn’t know that “Bobby” and his partner “Jimmy” were really Robert Gagne and Matthew Germanowski, special agents with the Drug Enforcement Administration, investigating Solomon’s involvement with a crooked longshoreman who was helping to bring guns and drugs into New York via cargo ships.

Drug traffickers have a choice of land, air, or sea when delivering product to American soil. Seaport routes are the slowest mode of transportation, but they carry the least risk of detection due to the tremendous volume of containers being moved in and out of American ports. Drug smugglers will take a container filled with typical imports—furniture, detergent, avocados—and hide millions of dollars’ worth of drugs inside the goods or behind false walls of the container. But they still need an unscrupulous longshoreman to help move the

contraband-laden containers past Customs agents. It's an easy job: the longshoreman simply hands the agent ninety-eight bills of lading for a shipment of a hundred containers—but he's already hidden the paperwork for the two containers loaded with the heroin. The Customs agent randomly pulls five bills of lading out of the ninety-eight and says: "Show me these containers." He inspects the five, they pass muster, and the entire shipment is approved to move out.

Gagne and his partner, Germanowski, figured that Ray Solomon's cohort was pushing about five hundred kilos of cocaine per shipment simply by pulling a couple of bills of lading out of a stack in the morning and then tucking them back in the stack at the end of the day. And for that ten seconds of work, he was paid roughly \$5,000 for each drug-loaded container.

A good DEA agent arrests a target and keeps fishing, throwing the little fish back, hoping to bait a bigger fish. Gagne and Germanowski caught the informant Tommy, who was used to bait Ray Solomon, who could be used to bait the bigger fish—the crooked longshoreman and his foreign bosses who were supplying the drugs. But Solomon was feeling "a little nervous." Gagne knew he needed to build more trust with Solomon. He decided it was time to make a social call: no drugs, no guns, no deals, just cards, TV, and beer on a Saturday afternoon in Tommy's Sunset Park, Brooklyn, apartment.

All DEA operations—from buy to bust—are supposed to be conducted on the books, with official operating plans that include a team of agents standing in the shadows. Agents are not to go out undercover by themselves. Gagne knew this. But he was a gutsy agent, known for finding creative ways to bend the rules in order to get his job done. He didn't want to take his partner away from his wife on a weekend, and he certainly didn't want to pull together a full DEA team presence with twenty-four hours' notice just so the other agents could spend their Saturday morning listening to him play cards with Tommy and Ray Solomon.

The next morning, Gagne was sitting on Tommy's couch when Solomon showed up.

"Hey, Ray," Gagne said.

The dealer strutted in, all wiry limbs and crazy smile, walked straight up to Gagne, and pulled a loaded gun from his waistband.

“What’s up?” Solomon sneered as he pointed the weapon at Gagne’s head.

Every nerve in Gagne’s body tensed as he trained his focus on the black steel barrel of the .25 three inches from his face. Tommy went pale.

Gagne could feel the butt of his own gun, a point-and-shoot Glock, against the small of his back. He calculated the time it would take to get his hands on his weapon, three layers deep, past his checkered field coat, sweatshirt, and sweatpants.

I’m just not getting to it, he thought. *There’s no way*. He struggled to suppress the paralyzing tunnel vision that made the barrel of Solomon’s gun seem to get bigger, closer.

Easy . . . stay calm, he told himself. *He’s testing me. Keep the cover. Keep talking*.

Gagne leaned forward, looked Solomon in the eye, and smiled. “Hey, what the fuck you got there?” Gagne reached for the gun. There was an awkward pause: Gagne’s hand in midair, Solomon’s eyes fixed on his.

Keep talking.

“That’s a beauty,” Gagne said.

Solomon was listening now. He glanced at the piece, admiring its cold form, then looked back into Gagne’s eyes like a stray dog looking for signs of weakness.

“Is that a twenty-five?” Gagne put his fingers around the barrel.

“Yeah,” Solomon said. “I just got it.”

Solomon loosened his grip and Gagne casually took the gun from the dealer’s hands.

“No kidding?” He willed his fingers steady as the instrument traded hands. Any visible tremors would clue Solomon that he’d been bluffed.

“Yeah, this is nice.” Gagne gauged the weapon’s weight. “I’ll give you three hundred bucks for it.”

“Get outta here!”

“No, really! I’ll give you three for it right now.”

“Nah, I’m not selling it,” Solomon said, betraying a shy, goofy smile as he accepted the gun back from Gagne and stuffed it down his waistband.

“No?” Gagne went to the kitchen to grab a beer out of the refrigerator for Solomon. “Change your mind”—he pulled out his wallet—“I got your money right here.” There was \$10 in that wallet.

Tommy was wan and mute from watching the near-disaster unfold in his living room. Gagne figured he had probably been racking his brain, trying to come up with an explanation he could give his drug-dealing buddies about how a dead DEA agent came to be found in his apartment.